

## Plays and games of Pantanal children: a study in an “escola das águas”<sup>1</sup>

### *Jogar e brincar de crianças pantaneiras: um estudo em uma “escola das águas”<sup>2 3</sup>*

Rogério Zaim-de-Melo <sup>(i)</sup>

Rosalia Maria Duarte <sup>(ii)</sup>

Marcia Regina do Nascimento Sambugari <sup>(iii)</sup>

<sup>(i)</sup> Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul – UFMS, Corumbá, MS, Brasil. <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0365-6000>, [rogeriozmelo@gmail.com](mailto:rogeriozmelo@gmail.com).

<sup>(ii)</sup> Pontifícia Universidade Católica do Rio de Janeiro – PUC-RJ, Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brasil. <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5758-2529>, [rosalia@puc-rio.br](mailto:rosalia@puc-rio.br).

<sup>(iii)</sup> Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul – UFMS, Corumbá, MS, Brasil. <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4671-2102>, [marcia.sambugari@ufms.br](mailto:marcia.sambugari@ufms.br).

#### Abstract:

In the city of Corumbá, Pantanal, there is a group of schools called “Schools of Water,” so called because they are in regions difficult to access and are influenced by the water cycle of Pantanal. The present article discusses the results of a doctoral study that analyzed the ludic culture of the children in one of these schools. The study was carried out with 33 children, in a school context, and involved observations, interviews, and drawings about games produced by children at the researcher’s request. The data were submitted to content analysis and categorized into two thematic axes: 1. Type of game; 2. Media in the ludic culture. The results indicate strong similarities between the play culture of Pantanal children and that of children from other regions of Brazil, and little presence of Pantanal culture in the ludic activities developed by the children in the school.

**Keywords:** ludic culture; Pantanal’s culture; escola das águas; Pantanal

<sup>1</sup> English version: Viviane Ramos - [vivianeramos@gmail.com](mailto:vivianeramos@gmail.com)

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<sup>3</sup> References correction and bibliographic normalization services: Caique Zen (Tikinet) – [revisao@tikinet.com.br](mailto:revisao@tikinet.com.br).

**Resumo:**

*No Pantanal sul-mato-grossense, no município de Corumbá, há um grupo de unidades escolares denominadas escolas das águas, assim chamadas por estarem situadas em regiões de difícil acesso e sofrerem influência do ciclo das águas. O presente artigo apresenta resultados de uma tese de doutorado que analisou a cultura lúdica das crianças de uma dessas escolas. O estudo foi realizado em contexto escolar, com 33 crianças, e envolveu observações, entrevistas e análise de desenhos sobre brincadeiras e jogos produzidos pelas crianças a pedido do pesquisador. Os dados foram submetidos a análise de conteúdo e categorizados em dois eixos temáticos: tipologia do jogo/brincadeira e mídias na cultura lúdica. Os resultados indicam fortes semelhanças entre a cultura lúdica das crianças pantaneiras e de outras regiões do Brasil e pouca presença da cultura pantaneira nas brincadeiras desenvolvidas pelas crianças na escola pesquisada.*

**Palavras-chave:** cultura lúdica, cultura pantaneira, escolas das águas, Pantanal

## Introduction

Games and plays are part of childhood. Games are a voluntary, fun, out-of-the-everyday-routine activity, able to intensely absorb who is playing, leading to a temporary suspension of reality (Huizinga, 1998). Brougère (1998a) affirms that games and plays are part of a “ludic culture”, understood as a group of procedures that make the game possible. It varies according to each subject and his/her group, habits, weather and spatial conditions, and is, according to the author, what gives the references for children to distinguish what is real and what is a play (a fight on school break, for example). This distinction “is not easy for adults, especially those who, in their daily activities, are farther from children” (Brougère, 1998b, p. 24).

Studies done in different contexts and spaces in the country indicate that games and plays are marked by Brazilian cultural identities and social characteristics, as in other cultures (Carvalho, 2007; Fernandes, 2015; Friedmann, 1995; Santos & Koller, 2003). The universality of playing is subsidized by the singularity of each region and the social context the child lives.

The physical environment where the play takes place also determines how we play, regarding qualitative aspects (grass, tress, rivers, etc.) and quantitative ones (number of vehicles, number of people/population density, distance between home and school, etc. (Rabinovich,

2003). The quantitative aspects ground the “new” ways of playing, that are adapted to the decrease of space and freedom to come and go, due to changes in the big cities, street traffic, and urban violence. Thus, many games and plays move from the streets to the gated communities, playgrounds, and apartments, going from the public space to the private one (Buckingham, 2007).

The advancements of technology, materialized especially in electronic games, gain importance in children’s activities. In these games, it is possible to manipulate colors, scenes, sounds, and images through a “magic” scenario, incorporating heroes, travelling to other galaxies, etc. (Martinez, 1994). Electronic games have contributed to the changes in childhood pointed out by Sarmiento (2003), with children sharing new tastes, which resignify ludic culture, this “set of rules and significations particular to the game that the player acquires and masters in the context of the game” (Brougère, 1998a, p. 23) electronic or traditional.

This article investigates the ludic culture of children who live in singular cultural context, outside urban environment and the omnipresence of digital media, with a strong interaction with natural environments. More specifically, the research deals with *crianças das águas* (water children), who study and live in schools surrounded by the waters of *Pantanal* in the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul. Called by the local school administration as *escolas das águas* (water schools). These schools are in regions difficult to access and are “islanded” when the rivers are full. During this period, the children live in the schools, as it would be very difficult (in some cases, impossible) the transport home-school. The *escolas das águas* are often the first educational institutionalized space, sometimes the only one (Zerlotti, 2014), to children from the riverbank communities and from the families of cowboys.

## **The *escolas das águas***

With around 160,000 km<sup>2</sup>, *Mato Grosso do Sul Pantanal* is located in the central region of South American, situated between Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil (the states of *Mato Grosso* and *Mato Grosso do Sul*), with a total of 16 cities, among which is Corumbá (Silva & Abdon, 1998). Located in the far west of Mato Grosso do Sul, in the frontier between Brazil and Bolivia, the city has 64,965 km<sup>2</sup> (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2017), occupying 44.74% of the total area of Pantanal (Costa, 2013).

*Pantanal* lands are influenced by the water cycle, when the rivers *Paraguai* and *Cuiabá* are full, the area receives water from different regions, moving slowly and creating permanent or temporary lakes (Paulo, 2011). The hydrological characteristics of the *Pantanal* environment create great access difficulties to the territory of Corumbá, leading the population to concentrate in the riverbanks and urban areas (Pereira, 2007).

To attend urban area students, Corumbá has a federal school, 10 state ones, 24 municipal ones, and 11 private schools (Silva Filho, 2017). The non-urban area is inhabited by farmers, farm workers, fishermen, and riverbank population (*ribeirinhos*), in the districts of Paiaguás, Nhecolândia, and Albuquerque. The municipal educational system of Corumbá attends this population that, in 2014, had 1,688 students 11 main schools and 31 outreach schools (Corumbá, 2015). Among those, five schools, with six outreach ones, are located within *Pantanal* (*escola das águas*), distributed in the subregions *Pantanal* of *Paraguai* and of *Paiaguás* (Table 1).

**Table 1 – Escolas das águas**

| MAIN SCHOOL  | OUTREACH   |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Paraguai Mirim</b><br/>Location: Ilha Verde, close to Serra do Amolar, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>60 km</b></p>           | <p><b>Jatobazinho</b><br/>Location: Ilha Verde, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>104 km</b></p>   |
| <p><b>São Lourenço</b><br/>Location: Barra do São Lourenço, region of Paiaguás. Close to the border MT/MS.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>60 km</b></p> | <p><b>Duque de Caxias</b><br/>Location: Destacamento Militar (Porto Índio).<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>290 km</b></p> <p><b>Santa Monica</b><br/>Location: Fazenda Santa Monica, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>488 km</b></p> |
| <p><b>Santa Aurélia</b><br/>Location: Colônia São Domingos, Fazenda Santa Maria, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>90 km</b></p>       | <p><b>São João</b><br/>Location: Colônia São Domingos, Fazenda Santa Irene, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>88 km</b></p>  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p><b>Sebastião Rolon</b><br/>Location: Colônia do Bracinho, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>180 km</b></p> | <p><b>Boa Esperança</b><br/>Location: Colônia do Cedro (Corixão), Fazenda Boa Esperança, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>180 km</b></p> <p><b>Nazaré</b><br/>Location: Colônia do Cedro, Fazenda Farroupilha, region of Paiaguás.<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>190 km</b></p> |
| <p><b>Porto Esperança</b><br/>Location: district of Porto Esperança<br/>Approximate distance to urban perimeter: <b>75 km</b></p>               | <p>No outreach schools</p>   |

Source: Corumbá (2015)

These schools have peculiar characteristics. Some are so close to the *Paraguai* river or its tributaries that we can see them from the classroom window. The school day can be part time (five hours daily), full-time (from 7 am to 3 pm), weekly boarding (students stay in the school during the week), or bimonthly boarding (students stay in school for two months).

The direction of these main schools and outreach ones is in Corumbá and is composed by a pedagogical director and two coordinators that help teachers by email and physically visit the schools at least once every two months. Most schools have two classrooms, kitchen, bathroom and teachers' dormitory with diesel-powered energy; some also have dormitories for students with bunkbeds and/or hammocks (Zerlotti, 2014). Classrooms assemble different grades, attending the enrollment demand; often, there are only two classes, one from 1<sup>st</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> grade, and another from 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> grade of Brazilian elementary education. Not all schools have the second phase of elementary education.

The research presented in this article was done at *Escola Fazenda Santa Mônica* (EFSM), which offers the first phase of elementary education and attends in the bimonthly boarding regime. The school can be accessed by three different ways: by air (approximately a one-hour flight from Corumbá ou Coxim); by land (leaving the city of Coxim, a trip of 280 km, lasting 8 to 12 hours, crossing close to 80 farm gates)<sup>4</sup>; and by river/land (through rivers *Paraguai*, *São*

<sup>4</sup> The land path passes through farms on the right bank of river *Taquari*, thus we need to cross the gates that separate properties.

*Lourenço* and *Piquiri*, three days and three nights sailing and more 96 km of land road, through about 6 hours). During the period of full rivers, there is a total isolation of the school. The children attended are sons and daughters of neighboring farms; in the beginning of the 2016 school year (year of the research), the school had 39 students enrolled.

## Methodology

The research privileged qualitative aspects, intending to capture and register elements of the ludic culture in the *escolas das águas* through children's point of view. 32 regular students and one non-enrolled student, who attended the school during the data collection period (August, 2016), participated in the study. All adults responsible for the children were consulted and approved their participation in the study, via the informed consent form<sup>5</sup>. Out of the 33 students, 16 were boys and 17 girls. The age varied between 4 and 16 years old, and only 10 students were in the corresponding age to their grade.

To collect the data we used multiple research tools: systematic observation of children playing outside the classroom; semi structured interview with children; and the analysis of drawings done by them. These varied of methods allowed to see the object through different perspectives (Graue & Walsh, 2003).

Before the beginning of the field work, we explained to the children the objectives of the research and the importance of their participation. We observed for 2 weeks, all days and times (on average, 12 hours a day, resulting in 168 hours of observation). Answering to a demand from the school principal, there was no observation in the classrooms. In a field diary, we wrote down about the games, plays, and conversations, aiming to register not only the game/play, but also children's expressions and body language. We often needed to informally talk to the students to understand the lyrics of a song or the rules of a game.

From a semi-structure script, we interviewed each participant. We asked children which were their favorite games/plays, where they played (school or home) and with whom they learned to play, among other questions. To preserve the interviewees' identities, we asked how

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<sup>5</sup> The research project was approved by the Ethics Committee of *Universidade Federal de Mato Grosso do Sul*. Participants' anonymity was guaranteed. We explained to children that they could refuse to participate or give up at any time, what has not happened.

they would like to be called in the study. There gave names of soccer players, country singers, cartoon characters, etc.

The data produced was organized with the software Nvivo and submitted to content analysis (Bardin, 2011; Bauer, 2002). We tried to construct explanatory categories and establish relations between them which would allow us to understand the collective universe researched. After the content analysis, the data– collected by different tools (interviews, drawings, observation notes)– were triangulated and we aimed to find convergencies between the information found to establish categories of analysis. For instance, the same game was mentioned by children and portrayed in a drawing.

## Results

To better describe and interpret the reality found, the results were organized in two thematic axes: types of games/plays and media presence in ludic culture.

### Types of games/plays

Games and plays were classified in two groups: spontaneous plays and games with rules. In spontaneous plays we can see the presence of a ludic spirit without the need of rules. Plays with declared guidelines were considered as games with rules.

### Spontaneous games and plays

Generally, spontaneous plays take place in the class breaks and while waiting for meals or for the shower, except the play of “floor fight” (which will be detailed) and the fart competition, that happened, respectively, during the shower and sleeping time. Spontaneous plays were classified according to what we considered as their basic element: force plays (FP), pranking plays (PP), plays to test limits (TL), and symbolic games (SG), as on table 2.



Table 2 – Classification of spontaneous plays

| Spontaneous games and plays  |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Force plays (FP):</b> floor fight; shoving; play fights; arm wrestling  | <b>Pranking plays (PP):</b> fart competition; run after each other holding an animal; slingshot with eraser  |
| <b>Plays to test limits (TL):</b> throw pebbles at the hollow of a tree; ride bikes; throw objects at the base of tree trunks; hit each other bums; play catch; run after each other holding an animal; run and slide; explore; swim; leapfrog; jump from one bed to the other; climb a tree trunk and jump. | <b>Symbolic games (SG):</b> play tractor; horse with a broom; play house; drawing; play school; imitation games; mother/child play; hairdressers; super heroes; play blowing horn; play the guitar |

Among the plays in which force is the main element are floor fights, when a child uses force to knock the other down, play fights and arm wrestling. Force games last no more than a minute and are not well regarded by the responsible adults, thus they normally take place during moments when they can bypass adults' supervision.

The results found are similar to those in Cordazzo and Vieira's (2008) study which researched games of 6 to 10-year-old children in *Florianópolis* (SC) and observed that the prohibition of force plays make children play at hide, while teachers are not paying attention. Gosso (2004) classifies these type of activity as "turbulent play", involving fights, chasing, or running away. The key to identify this type of play would be children's facial expression, pointing to the ludic nature of the action. Force plays tend to happen among boys, for cultural reason, as in western and traditional societies the role and expectations on boys are different from what is expected of girls (Morais, 2004).

In pranking plays, it is essential to provoke laughter; the ludic activity has to make people laugh, there is no force dispute and limits are not tested, but, as in force one, pranking takes place when adult supervision is lighter. We observed pranks in fart competitions before sleeping, when running after a classmate with an animal, using a slingshot to hit a classmate with a piece of eraser, and in the story told by a student about a prank he played at home on his brother, as registered in the field notes:



HP: It is easy to catch an armadillo, to catch an alligator is another story. Teacher, have you ever caught a small alligator?

Researcher: No.

HP: If the alligator's mother is not around, we can lasso it, or catch it by the back of the neck.

Researcher: Do you catch many alligators?

HP: Here at the school, no. It is forbidden. The teacher assistant says it is dangerous, but at home I do. Once I put one on my brother's bed.

We also registered plays to “test limits” in which children tested and compared their physical limits through vigorous exercises, precision of motor abilities, or activities in the frontier between safe and risk. These plays are almost always competitive, putting at stake the need to prove physical superiority. In these category we found: ride bike around the school, throw objects at the base of tree trunks, to hit each other bums, run and slide, run after each other holding an animal, play leapfrog, jump from bed to bed, and climb a tree trunk and jump.

In leapfrog, the overcoming started by the recognition of the child's corporal limit, as it is essential to have an awareness of one's own body to succeed in the play. On this play, one child jumps over the back of another that remain motionless, with a curved back and hand on the shoulder. To jump, the child needs to take a certain distance and, at the time of jumping, has to place both hands on the back of the friend to get a boost. After the jump, they switch places.

In a research with children in the city of Ubatuba (SP), Morais (2004, p. 114) also observed this type of plays/games, defining them as “plays of physical activity in which children clearly showed they were improving their abilities, overcoming their limits”.

In some activities, as jumping from one bed to another, besides the physical limit there is also an emotional one, as it is a dangerous activity and a fall can seriously injure a child. As pointed out by Cravo (2006, p. 47), the risk and the danger are part of the formation of children's identity:

Children go a long way to form their individuality. This period is marked by achievements and discoveries, frustrations and fears, curiosities and behavioral changes that not also please parents and teachers [...] since early childhood, with the personality formation, children's plays present themselves based on values and social development that get stronger with time, influencing the construction of our identities.

We also perceived “symbolic games” activities, that is, plays in which make-belief is the main element, in which a movement, gesture, or object is used to represent situations in children's everyday lives. It is a ludic way to act out reality, present, in this specific case, in the following plays: play tractor; horse with a broom; play house; drawing; play school; imitation games; mother/child play; hairdressers; super heroes; play a blowing horn; play the guitar.

These plays are not very different from those found in other studies on children's ludic culture (Garcia, 2010; Gosso, 2004; Morais, 2004), which reproduce reality while playing common everyday situations. Morais (2004), for instance, observes in her research that girls simulated driving a car, going to the hairdresser, taking children to school, to ballet classes, or to the shopping mall. The Parakanã Indigenous children observed by Gosso (2004), imitated hunting with bow and arrow and washing the clothes with a corn cob.

In the symbolic games of EFSM students, besides the common symbolic reproductions, children reproduce the everyday life in the farms: they ride horses with a broom stick, play the blowing horn with a piece of hose, and simulate driving a tractor. Through symbolic play, children can create a universe without rules or punishments of the adult world, transforming reality, and expressing their wish for the world, while simultaneously developing psychological mechanisms to better understand it, adapt themselves to it or even transform it. According to Uzun de Freitas (2010, p. 146), the symbolic function “allows children to express their desire, conflicts, etc., and gradually adapt to the environment they live”.

When playing houses and on mom-child plays the children at EFSM imitated the adults and, at least one of them played the role of authority, determining what could and could not be done. Monteluisa et al. (2015), in a study in the Indigenous community Shipibo-Konibo, in the Peruvian Amazon, point to the importance of a game in which children played as hunters and constructed bows and arrows. According to the authors, plays, besides been essential to the intercultural development, allows children to the represent a role they will have in the group as adults, while developing and improving the necessary abilities to construct important instruments to survival.

In the studied context, there are differences in the activities depending on age and gender. Force plays are more common among boys, no matter the age. The difference becomes more evident when children get older. In the second place of boys' preference are the activities that test limits. These preferences corroborate the study Bichara (2001), who affirms that boys engage more in force games and tend to public show the dominance in interactions. Morais (2004), when studying children from Ubatuba (SP), also saw a higher frequency of force plays by boys, who would use around 20% of their times to such plays/games.

When categorizing children's plays from a rural community in the Northeast of Brazil, Santos e Dias (2010) also noticed that force plays predominantly took place among boys. For the authors, "play fights are more common among boys, consistent to the idea that the practice of fight abilities is more important to boys" (Santos & Dias, 2010, p. 590). As force plays, in EFSM, the plays/games to test limits were also mostly done by boys, except those under the age of 8, when girls participated more of those activities than boys.

Oliveira (2007), when mapping and classifying plays and games in the everyday life of Guarani Indigenous children in a community Aracruz (ES), noticed that 31% of observation time was occupied by plays which tested limits: 22% involving boys and only 9% involving girls. A similar result was found by Santos & Dias (2010), who observed a higher frequency of physical exercises, such as running or jumping, among boys. According to Morais (2004, p. 33),

girls prefer to choose activities that are more structured and guided by strict social rules, tending to follow more the rules stipulated by adults. Boys tend to have activities freer from adults' interference and the contact with other boys tend to make them develop more frequently than girls, interactional problems and antisocial styles.

The data obtained at ESFM diverge from those found by Gosso (2004) who did not find a difference in the frequency of limit-testing plays (called by the author "physical contingency") among Parakanã Indigenous, nor by gender nor age. The author infers that maybe the collaborative environment of the community has influenced this lack of game distinction by gender, corroborating with the hypothesis that this is distinction is cultural. Cordazzo and Vieira (2008), when researching plays of children from 6 to 10 years old at school and gender differences, noticed that in the group of children from 9 to 10, there was a decrease of 35% in the total number of plays among the girls. The authors attribute this decrease to the physiological changes that girls go through in the beginning of puberty.

Pranking plays happened only a few times; almost always with the involvement of boys over the age of 10, only once a girl was involved. Morais (2004) uses in her study the idea of “mockery”, referring to the intentional provocation followed by ludic signs (laughter and non-seriousness of action). The games in which a child runs after the other is close to this concept; on the other hand, in the fart competition there is no provocation in the sense of mockery, it is laughing for the sake of laughing. According to Morais, among the observed children from Ubatuba, mockery behavior was stronger among boys, only happening four times among girls. Though in smaller absolute numbers, the same happened among the children at EFSM.

While force plays, limit testing, and pranks are more common among boys, the symbolic game is more frequent among girls, especially those under 8 years old. The predominance of symbolic games among younger girls was also identified by Gosso (2004), Morais (2004), and Oliveira (2007). All points all that, with age, symbolic games decline and the games with rules become more evident. In this decline, children’s social game is widened, as, according to Rocha (2010, p. 25):

The beginning of the social game in children is characterized by a long period of egocentrism. On one hand the child is dominated by a set of rules imposed to her. On the other, because she is not in the same level of equality with the older ones, she uses her isolation without noticing it. In this phase, the child plays for herself. The true *socius* of the plays is not the real partner, but the older, ideal, and abstract one, which she tries to imitate internally- each for themselves, and all together with the oldest one ( egocentric game).

With little contact with people from other places, EFSM children have a vast repertoire of spontaneous plays and games, especially symbolic games among girls and plays involving physical vigor among the boys. The children from *Pantanal* bring elements of rural life that are reflected in their games/plays, playing the blowing horn, catching an alligator to prank a friend, or even swim on the dams formed when the river waters are full in *Pantanal*, as shown in this dialogue between the children and the researcher:

Roberto (R): When it starts to get warm again and the river is full, we'll ask the teacher to takes us there to swim.

Researcher: Can you swim?

R: I can, I learned to swim in the well with my bothers.

Researcher: Well? [with a weird face]

Shrek: It is a dam. I learned to swim in the river close to the port in Corumbá, my father would through me at the water and after would send a rope for me to grab.

HP: I know how to swim just a bit.

Boys: Well, the last time we went, when the water was down, you drowned.

HP: That's because I fell into a hole

Together with the spontaneous plays, we observed plays and games involving declared rules.

## Games with rules

The plays and games that presuppose rules were categorized according to the classification proposed by Ruiz (1992): (a) Games with rules in open spaces (GROS), or street games; and (b) Games with rules in closed spaces (GRCS), or tabletop games, as on table 3 bellow. In the context of this research, these types of games were played spontaneously, by children's initiative, except the basketball and soccer matches, led by a teacher.

Games with rules in open spaces need a wide space, as they demand players' movement. Those in close spaces can also be played in open spaces.

Table 3 – Classification of games with rules

| GAMES WITH RULES   |  |
|--|--|
| <p><b>Games with rules in open spaces (GROS)</b></p> <p>Basketball; Ball; “<i>Bolita</i>” (marble); <i>Corre-cotia</i> (duck, duck, goose); Hide and seek; catch and variations; <i>Peteca</i> (similar to a shuttlecock); skip rope</p> | <p><b>Games with rules in closed spaces (GRCS)</b></p> <p>Hand games; card games; choosing games; board games; pass the ring; table tennis</p> |

Games with rules often imply the presence of another; it is rarely played alone (with the exception of electronic games), this was one aspect considered in the activities observed. The weather conditions also influence games: in days of good weather there is a predominance of open space games; in rainy or cold days, those on closed spaces.

The most played game with rules in open spaces was *oco* (hole), played with *bolitas* or *gude* (marble), as it is known in other parts of the country. The game field consists of three equidistant holes in a straight line. You play with a marble or, in the absence of it, spherical objects are adapted to the game; the most common one is the seed of *bocaiuva*. The student Black Ranger (BR) describes the game:

BR: Teacher, we are going to play *oco*. Here there are three *ocas*, you need to *ocar* [to remove the marble from the hole] the three of them to start the killing, starting with the farthest *oco*. And also, if you are close to an *oco*, I can *bicar* your *bolita*, to sent it far away.

All rule games have specific words and concepts. To be a participant, players, besides ability, need to master concepts and a specific vocabulary. In this context, the game of *bolita*, with expressions as *bicar* (to hit another player’s *bolita*) and remove the *cabaço* (to hit in the first attempt another players *bolita* from a long distance).

To master the motor abilities needed for a game of *bolita* is not enough for the player to win a match outside his geographical domains. Monteiro and Carvalho (2011), when analyzing the game of marbles in the neighborhood of Taquaril, in Belo Horizonte (MG), find strategies used by player to make the opponent’s move more difficult and to facilitate theirs, for example, when a player asks for *limpes*, a demand to clean the field before throwing the marble. To master

this type of tactics is essential to do well in the play. As the children at EFSM, the children observed by Monteiro and Carvalho also have their own trigger-action vocabulary, so that if they happen to play in *Pantanal*, besides mastering the game from a motor point of view, they would need to know the senses and meanings of the vocabulary used in the game.

Another well observed game with rules is catch and its variations, such as *pique-fruta*, recurrent among smaller girls, and *pique no ar*. Frequently among the children at EFSM, hide and seek is played in open spaces, and can be played in two ways: the most conventional one in which one child counts and the others hide, and an adapted one, in which three children count and three hide. The latter makes the game more dynamic, speeding the process and reducing the waiting time. A study done by Dodge and Carneiro (2007) with parents of children from 6 to 12 years old, from different social segments, in 77 Brazilian cities, pointed that hide and seek and catch are played by 69% of children from D and E classes, 65% of those in class C, and 54% of classes B and A.

In the context studied here, games with balls (soccer and basketball) took place in Physical Education classes. Though they have a space specific for these games ( a land court with basketball hoops and a field with soccer goals), the children are only authorized to play in the presence of a teacher or responsible adult.

What the students call basketball is an adaptation of the sport: they bounce the ball with one or two hands, shots are done at random, the ball is thrown in the direction of the hoop and, occasionally, points are scored. Soccer, on the other hand, is very similar to the sport itself, the students know and follow the rules during the game. Players complain to/of each other, call fouls, and, when they cannot solve an issue themselves, ask for the teacher's help. Besides soccer, children play freely with the ball, kicking it to one another, play keepie-uppie, etc. One factor that can influence the greater knowledge of soccer rules relates to the fact that Brazil is, discursively, the "land of soccer", where children from an early age have a great volume of information on the sport and its rules, given by adults and the media. As pointed out by Giglio, Morato and Almeida (2008, p. 5):



Learn how to play soccer in Brazil has always had the support of a cultural meaning to its practice. Since childhood, Brazilians are influenced by this meaning [...] They invent games with the feet. They make the verb “play ball” an identification almost exclusive to play soccer, with very rare exceptions.

The game *corre-cotia* (similar to ‘duck duck goose’) took place in one of the classes with 2<sup>nd</sup> grade children, who asked the teacher for this activity. In the beginning they were excited with the game, but the interest died down when one of the children (Pilot, 10 years) incorporated the role of the “wet blanket”, described by Huizinga (1998) as a player that, when not taking part of the game or temporarily out of it, intentionally acts to end the game. Pilot was caught and, by the rules of the game, should seat in the middle of the circle, becoming the “*galinha choca*”. The student, however, stood up declaring that the game was boring, and he did not want to play any longer. The teacher explained that staying in the middle was part of the game, but Pilot repeated that the game was boring and did not want to play it. Some boys followed him, ending the game. The incorporation of the wet blanket can be related to one of the essential parts of the games with rules: “ the demand of efficiency: you need to set scores, be efficient, win” (Ferraz, 2002, p. 29). According to the author, many children, when feeling they are not efficient, give up.

The game of *peteca* and skip rope also took place in open spaces. In *peteca*, contrary to other games with more declared rules, learned with more capable peers, the rules were built during the game.

Cinderella: Can I play?

Pedro and Yasmin: Yeah.

Cinderella: How do we play it?

Pedro: You can’t let it fall.

Yasmin: nor hit it with both hands.

Skipping rope started with a simple rule: skip the rope and who misses it, gives the turn to another. The variations of the game were followed by chants (“*Foguinho*” and “*Um homem bateu na minha porta*”).

As in the games with rules in open spaces, the weather conditions and daylight determined the games on closed spaces. In this type, boardgames and hand games were the most observed. The most common board games at EFSM were checkers and domino, though

the school offered many other games. Maybe the choice was due to the simple rules and easy assimilation, what does not mean that the children did not try to play other games. During the research, some children around 7-8 years old tried to play *Pizzaria Maluca*, inviting the researcher to help them: “Teacher, come here, help us with this game, you have to read it and we don’t know it”. But, while the rules were been read, some students lost interest and left.

Hand games were recurrent in closed spaces. During the observation, eight girls played four variations of hand games, always followed by chants of easy memorization passed through generations, such as: “*Aranha-caranguejeira*”, “*Babalu foi à escola*”, “*Cento e cinquenta e nós quatro*” (the last chanted with the boys). These type of activities does not need toys or accessories. The children chant and recite and often follow what is asked by the song (“me with her”, “me with that one”, “we on top”, “we on bottom”, clapping each other hands as they go along). We can play with two or more participants. To Gainza (1996, p. 13), hand games are “played from a rhyme of a chant. In some cases, the game is an inherent part of the song, having started together. Others, the gestures are added by the children themselves to certain traditional songs”.

The rules of these games are simple: you must follow the melody of the songs and clap each other hands; the mistake on the movement normally leads to laughter and, sometimes, the exclusion of the game. Hand games are learned by children in a very simple way; one imitates the other, repeating the role model until the words and movements are perfectly in synch with the game (Gainza, 1996).

We observed two games with rule in closed spaces used to choose the participants of a certain activity: ‘odds or evens’ and the chant ‘*Papai Noel*’ (Santa Claus). ‘Odds or evens’ were used by the children to determine who would start a game or play. Amongst older children, the winner was quickly determined by adding the number of fingers. Among younger ones, fingers were not added, but pointed sequentially, starting with offs, followed by even and so on, until the result determined the winner.

The game ‘*Papai Noel*’, which allows the choosing between more than two participants, was used to determine who would be the chaser in a game of *pique-futa* (an adaptation to catch). Due to the easy rules, in the games of choice, regardless of children’s age, there is basically no conflict among players. The hypothesis of a lack of conflict is a social convention according to which one does not question the results of choosing games (be it ‘odds or evens’, ‘smallest wood stick’, ‘rock, paper, scissors’, or any other). The loser does not question it. This principle

is questioned by younger children, still in the anomie phase, in which there are no rules in the game and pleasure is simply motor (Camargo & Suleiman, 2006).

In all games, regardless of the space, some children knew the rules, and the activity flew more naturally. The complexity of rules is a determinant factor to the success of an activity: games with few rules tend to be more successful. Garkov (1990) understands this complexity classifying games between those with strong or loose rules. Strong rules are preestablished and change only from one group to another, a generation to another, etc. These rules establish a beginning, a middle, and an end to the game. Garkov gives the example of hide and seek, and marbles. The games of loose rules are more flexible with fewer fixed rules (hand games, skip rope, etc).

Games with rules are essentially social, as children need each other to play. “The rules of the games have a close relation to the existing social, moral, and cultural rules” (Cordazzo & Vieira, 2008, p. 92), and when playing with rules, as it is part of a reality legitimated by conventions, guarantees and organizes the coexistence in groups and leads to cooperation (Caiado, 2012).

As in the spontaneous games and plays, in the games with rules (in open and closed spaces) the weather conditions, age range, and gender are factor that influence the activity choice. The games with rules in open spaces are more common among boys of all ages, especially those between 8 and 10 years old. The most common game is *oco*, played with *bolitas* (marble) or, in the absence of it, any type of spherical object, mainly the seeds of *bocaiuva*.

The habit of playing *bolita* with seeds is not exclusive to the children of EFSM. Children from the community of Livramento, in Manaus (AM), played with the seed of another tropical fruit, *tucumã*, as they did not have glass marbles (Soares, 2010). The high frequency of the game of *bolitas* at EFSM is justified by some reasons: you do not need a lot of space and many fields can be created at the same time, in a place where it is allowed to play without supervision; you do not need bigger groups, only two people is enough. And the *bolitas* used are from the school, available to the students, who only need to take care of them and return when the game is over.

While *bolita* is a boys' game, hand games are almost exclusively played by younger girls, up to 10 years old. These finding corroborates Souza (2009) that, when observing children from 5 to 10 years old in a public school in Campo Largo (PR), saw that most hand games were played by girls between 6 and 10 years old. To Bichara (1999), the society and the culture to

which children belong is reflected in the plot of plays and in peer relations. The game of *bolita* and the hand games, for instance, ratify gender stereotypes, a reflex of *Pantanal* culture that defines which activities are done by men, field work, and by women, domestic work.

Some plays are common to all age ranges, such as shoving each other and playing ball. The ludic behavior changes with time. In this study, we observed 41 games and/or plays, spontaneous or with rules, more varied between girls younger than 8 years old and boys from 8 to 10: in both groups we identified 18 games and plays, 44% of the total. With aging, the number of plays decrease among girls, among the older ones this number is reduced to 45% compared to those between 8-10 years old.

The ludic activities observed at EFSM are very similar to those reported by teachers in other *escolas das águas*, as presented by Garcia (2010): play with cars, hairdressers, play house, ride bike, catch, hide and seek, *bolita*, skip rope, make-believe and imagination, truck driver, and ox cart guide.

The influence of media is very shy, observed only in some plays and in the nicknames adopted by the students. Media is more present at the children's houses, with television and satellite dishes, smartphones and Wi-Fi; at the school these resources are not much used, in class or in their free time.

The electronic games are a part of the universe of five EFSM students, who claim they play on videogames and cellphones at their houses. To Souza e Salgado (2008, p. 210), the presence of this type of play defines contemporary ludic culture, that has as one of its main aspects the convergency of medias, as “ plays today are connected to cartoons, videogames, films, websites, card games, toys, magazines, creating a system of communication and information at the same time cohesive and with multiple interfaces”.

Studies call attention to the protagonism of media in the ludic culture of contemporary children (Bernardes, 2011; Colhante et al., 2008; Couto, 2013), but at EFSM this influence seems softer. During the observation period, we saw two ludic situations with a strong mediatic influence: a student would throw spells from the Harry Potter universe and two girls dancing and singing “Let it go”, theme song of the film *Frozen*. An episode that indicates the little media influence compared to the urban context took place during a conversation of the researchers with two students who were playing with dolls:

Researcher: Do you know how these dolls are called?

Girls [looking at each other]: No!

Researcher: Don't you?!

Girls: They are called dolls.

Those were Barbie dolls, the highest selling dolls in the world, with an estimation of one billion unities sold in more than 150 countries, present in television ads since 1959 (Cechin & Silva, 2012). However, for those girls they were simply dolls. The episode suggests that these children are (still) out of what Sarmiento (2003) called “globalized childhood”, though some students have identified themselves with television characters and singers and had similar tastes: *Pokémon* cards, videogames, Japanese cartoons, etc. A globalization of childhood exists, but, in some far corners of Brazil, it is only crawling.

## Final Remarks

The *escola das águas* in the *Pantanal* of Mato Grosso do Sul have peculiar characteristics, especially been at the mercy of the water cycle. Due to the river tides, they have their own flexible school calendar, based on weather demands. In these schools, in particular at EFSM, time seems to pass slowly, lazily, allowing children intense periods for plays and games. Though the students stay eight hours in the classrooms, when the bell rings, during the breaks and before the shower, students run and are already in their ‘backyard’, ready to play: a game of *bolitas*, play catch, or a simple shoving each other around, leading to a warm loud laughter.

The ludic culture of EFSM students is rich in plays and games and does not differ much from children’s culture in other regions of Brazil, for instance, the Parakanãs, in Pará (Gosso, 2004), in Taquaril, in Minas Gerais (Monteiro & Carvalho, 2011), and even in the same state of Mato Grosso do Sul (Guerra, 2009; Garcia, 2010). Younger ones play make-believe and like to play in groups, the game of *bolitas* is the most frequent activity and almost exclusively masculine. This popularity of *bolitas* is maybe due to the easy access to the toy and the possibility to substitute it for materials widely available, as *bocaiuva* seeds and smooth pebbles, besides the fact that the field is on a space of the school in which they are allowed to play.

There is a clear gender separation in the games with rules: while boys like to play on open spaces (based on sports or catch and variations), girls prefer activities in close spaces, as

hand games. This separation is often ratified by school rules: girls form a line for meals in front of the boys and get their uniforms in different schedules, and even brothers and sisters or cousins do not play together.

In the universe researched it was not possible to find elements that cleared showed specificities of *Pantanal* culture in children's plays. Does this happen because such culture is not in the school in general? Do the teachers work with local peculiarities? It was not possible to satisfactorily answer those questions, which were not in the scope of the research. Other studies are needed to widen the knowledge on the *escolas das águas* of *Pantantal*.

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